




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR KEPPEL

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PUBLIC HEALTH AND OTHER LEGISLATION (EXTENSION OF EXPIRING PROVISIONS) AMENDMENT BILL

 **Ms LAUGA** (Keppel—ALP) (12.46 pm): I rise to speak to the Public Health and Other Legislation (Extension of Expiring Provisions) Amendment Bill 2022. It was interesting hearing from the Leader of the Opposition about how the opposition sees its role in this place as being a role of trying to call for transparency and to effect change, but effectively all that I have seen since the beginning of this pandemic is a really unhelpful opposition, an opposition that has got in the way of government trying to respond to a disaster, a global pandemic. There were the number of times that the opposition initially called for the borders to be opened when our government was trying to respond and keep people safe—keep Queenslanders safe—how unhelpful it was about some of the messaging it was putting out there around vaccinations, how unhelpful it was when it came to rolling out vaccinations and also a number of other things throughout this pandemic.

Throughout a disaster is the time to be united and it is a time that the opposition could have pulled up its socks and said, 'We're here to keep Queenslanders safe as well,' but instead it got in the way numerous times. I think often it was just clearly political point scoring—getting in the way, cheap politics. I recall the Leader of the Opposition talking about how he wrote to the Premier about getting vaccinated in a bid to try and show unity in the vaccination rollout, but yet where was the letter to the Prime Minister about rapid antigen test supplies in Queensland? Where was the letter to the Prime Minister about the vaccine rollout, or the vaccine 'stroll-out' as my colleague the member for Jordan called it the other day? Why was the Leader of the Opposition not proactively writing to our Prime Minister about ways in which he could support Queenslanders and keep Queenslanders safe? Instead, it was about publicity stunts and getting in the way of this government working towards keeping Queenslanders safe.

The main purpose of this bill is to extend provisions to directly support Queensland's COVID-19 public health response and the bill amends the provisions beyond the current expiry date of 30 April 2022 for a period of up to six months. It is only six months, and we need this six months. The medical advice is that we need six months and that is why I am speaking in support of this bill in this place.

For the last two years COVID has presented significant challenges to health systems, economies, governments and families across the world. Queensland's successful management of COVID-19 to date has enabled high vaccination rates across the Queensland population. This has certainly mitigated the impact of the public health emergency on our health system and on the community and has ultimately saved lives. This success is largely due to the swift and flexible public health response that began from the initial detection and identification of the virus. I think it is amazing that Queensland was the first state or territory in the entire country to declare a state of emergency and to respond to this pandemic. We were ahead of the game and that put us in good stead to help Queenslanders stay as safe as possible.

Queensland was able to implement decisive public health measures to keep COVID-19 contained until we reached 80 per cent vaccination of the eligible population—until, indeed, a vaccination was actually developed and then administered. Public health measures, such as border

restrictions, mask wearing and quarantine, meant Queensland could manage the transmission of COVID-19 into Queensland in a controlled way once the population was maximally protected by vaccination for serious disease. These public health measures were made possible by temporary legislative changes made in 2020 and these legislative changes have been extended and supplemented in subsequent amendment acts.

The temporary legislative framework has been critical in enabling us to respond quickly and flexibly to evolving circumstances. This has been really important given the continuing unpredictability of the pandemic. An agile and rapid public health response continues to be necessary as Queensland transitions from a containment approach to living with the risks of COVID-19. Whilst Queensland is returning to more normal social and economic conditions, COVID-19 remains a risk to people's health and the health system. For this reason the bill proposes to extend the expiry date for all temporary legislative measures that are directly related to the public health response beyond the current expiry date of 30 April 2022. The bill does this by inserting an expiry date for public health measures as the COVID-19 public health legislation expiry day. The bill defines this day as 31 October 2022, or the day that the Minister for Health and Ambulance Services ends the declared public health emergency under the Public Health Act, whichever is earlier.

As Queensland transitions towards more normal social and economic conditions, there is no longer a compelling need or justification for continuing most of the associated COVID-19 measures. I say that again: there is no longer a compelling need or justification for continuing most of the associated COVID-19 measures. The public health measures linked to vaccination status, a plan for 80 per cent and beyond, sets out measures to protect Queenslanders as the state reopens and restrictions ease for businesses and vaccinated individuals.

The phased approach to less restrictive measures means that most of the temporary measures introduced to facilitate the continued functioning of Queensland institutions and the economy to the extent possible are not expected to be needed beyond 30 April 2022. Accordingly, it is proposed that most of the associated COVID-19 measures, including extraordinary regulations and statutory instruments made pursuant to the modification framework under the COVID-19 ER Act, will not be prevented from expiring, except for the limited savings and transitional arrangements necessary to facilitate the return to normal operations in the most efficient and effective way.

COVID-19 has touched every one of us in different ways. People have missed weddings, births, funerals, they have missed work. Businesses have been impacted. Sadly, lives have been lost. As a result of the measures that we have had in place over the last few years we have been able to minimise that impact as much as possible and minimise the impact on our health system as much as possible. While I am on my feet, can I give a big shout-out to all of the healthcare heroes who have worked so tirelessly to keep us safe over the last few years: the nurses, the doctors, the pathology staff—I make special mention of the pathology lab at the Rockhampton Hospital which has consistently returned the fastest results in Queensland over the last few years, especially as a result of our fast Panther machine. If your HHS does not have one, you need to get one! In four to six hours those results are back, with 700 tests done in one go.

I thank public health officers, such as Dr Gulam Khandaker and Dr Nicolas Smoll at the CQHHS, who have been providing fast, clear and consistent advice to the community. Organisers of community events have been very grateful for the support that the public health unit has provided through those COVID-safe plans that we had back in the day. I thank the contact tracers who were also responsible for identifying, contacting and interviewing people right across the community.

I thank the PCR testing teams who were often working out in the elements. One day in January we had line-ups out the university gates at the CQ University testing clinic. Those healthcare workers were drenched in sweat from being out in the sun in the middle of a heatwave. It was wonderful to see people taking water and food to those people while they were there to provide a really important service to our community.

I also thank our vaccination teams. I know well some of the nurses in the vaccination teams. They have copped a lot of abuse from people. I thank them for the work they have done, the commitment to vaccinating our community, and putting up with some really nasty people who have disrespected them in their role.

I thank the aged-care workers and give a special shout-out to the North Rockhampton Nursing Centre staff who have done so well at managing outbreaks at the centre. This pandemic has shown the importance of nurse-to-patient ratios in our aged-care centres. The North Rockhampton Nursing Centre, a Queensland government owned and operated centre, has those ratios in place as a result of this Palaszczuk Labor government's commitment to nurse-to-patient ratios. We need those ratios in other aged-care homes. We have been able to manage outbreaks in our aged-care centres better than other centres because of those ratios.

I especially thank the paramedics who I know have had to transport COVID-positive patients. They put their own health and safety at risk when they care for people who need to be transported to hospital. I give a special shout-out to triple 0 call centre staff. We saw a huge increase in triple 0 calls when people were testing positive. I commend the bill to the House.